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Governor's Office of Planning & Research

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STATE CLEARINGHOUSE

Jeannie Naughton
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Subject: Notice of Preparation of an Environmental Impact Report for the Rolling Hills Estates General Plan Update, SCH #2021050450, City of Rolling Hills Estates, Los Angeles County

Dear Ms. Naughton:

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) has reviewed a Notice of Preparation (NOP) of an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) from the City of Rolling Hills Estates (City; Lead Agency) for the Rolling Hills Estates General Plan Update (Project). The NOP's supporting documents included an Initial Study. Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments and recommendations regarding those activities involved in the Project that may affect California fish and wildlife. Likewise, we appreciate the opportunity to provide comments regarding those aspects of the Project that CDFW, by law, may be required to carry out or approve through the exercise of its own regulatory authority under the Fish and Game Code.

CDFW's Role

CDFW is California's Trustee Agency for fish and wildlife resources and holds those resources in trust by statute for all the people of the State [Fish & G. Code, §§ 711.7, subdivision (a) & 1802; Pub. Resources Code, § 21070; California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines, § 15386, subdivision (a)]. CDFW, in its trustee capacity, has jurisdiction over the conservation, protection, and management of fish, wildlife, native plants, and habitat necessary for biologically sustainable populations of those species (Id., § 1802). Similarly, for purposes of CEQA, CDFW is charged by law to provide, as available, biological expertise during public agency environmental review efforts, focusing specifically on projects and related activities that have the potential to adversely affect State fish and wildlife resources.

CDFW is also submitting comments as a Responsible Agency under CEQA (Pub. Resources Code, § 21069; CEQA Guidelines, § 15381). CDFW expects that it may need to exercise regulatory authority as provided by the Fish and Game Code, including lake and streambed alteration regulatory authority (Fish & G. Code, § 1600 *et seq.*). Likewise, to the extent implementation of the Project as proposed may result in "take", as defined by State law, of any species protected under the California Endangered Species Act (CESA) (Fish & G. Code, § 2050 *et seq.*), or CESA-listed rare plant pursuant to the Native Plant Protection Act (NPPA; Fish & G. Code, §1900 *et seq.*), CDFW recommends the Project proponent obtain appropriate authorization under the Fish and Game Code.

Conserving California's Wildlife Since 1870

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Project Description and Summary

Objective: The City's current General Plan dates back to 1992 and is in need of an update as new opportunities, challenges, and approaches have emerged in recent years. The General Plan Update, if adopted, would serve as the City's blueprint for development and investment through 2040.

The proposed Project will address nine General Plan elements, seven of which are required by State law (i.e., circulation, conservation, housing, land use, noise, open space, and safety). The City of Rolling Hills Estates' current land use plan consists of 10 land use categories, including four that are related to commercial development; four that correspond to residential development; one that corresponds to institutional uses; and one that relates to open space. The residential neighborhoods, parks, and recreation areas are well-established and are not expected to change during the timeline of this proposed Project. It is anticipated that the Project would adjust the land use designations of certain parcels to match their current uses, including certain open space areas and parcels built out with high-density residential uses.

In addition to citywide planning direction, the Project is expected to include focused long-range planning direction and visioning for the Commercial District. Potential changes to the Commercial District include revising development standards to reflect market needs. In addition, the Project is expected to incentivize development/redevelopment in a manner consistent with the City's vision for the Commercial District (vision to be developed as part of the Project).

Location: The City is located in the center of the Palos Verdes Peninsula in the southwestern portion of the County of Los Angeles. The City is bounded by the City of Rancho Palos Verdes on the west and south; the City of Rolling Hills on the south; the City of Palos Verdes Estates on the north; the City of Torrance on the north and northeast; the City of Lomita on the north and east; and unincorporated Los Angeles County on the south and southeast.

Comments and Recommendations

CDFW offers the comments and recommendations below to assist the City in adequately identifying, avoiding, and/or mitigating the Project's significant, or potentially significant, direct, and indirect impacts on fish and wildlife (biological) resources.

Specific Comments

- 1) Sensitive Habitats and Open Space. Sensitive habitats/open space in the Project area is present in the form of parks and reserves, including, but not limited to, Ernie Howlett Park, South Coast Botanic Garden, Linden H. Chandler Preserve, Vista Del Norte Reserve, George F. Canyon Nature Center, Highridge Park, and the former Palos Verdes Landfill. The Project area is also adjacent to conserved lands in the neighboring City of Rancho Palos Verdes according to the *Land Ownership* dataset available in the [California Natural Diversity Database in BIOS](#) (CDFW 2021a).
 - a) CDFW recommends the City analyze and discuss the Project's direct impacts on sensitive habitats/open space within the Project area. The Project could result in loss of sensitive habitats/open space due to fuel modifications and introduction of non-native, invasive plants facilitated by the Project (collectively, indirect impacts). The EIR should

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disclose the acreage of sensitive habitats and open space that would be lost as a result of the proposed Project, including all areas subject to fuel modifications and grading to accommodate development. CDFW also recommends the City analyze and discuss the Project's potential impacts on conserved lands adjacent to the Project area.

- b) CDFW recommends the Project avoid developing and encroaching onto sensitive habitats/open space. Encroachment onto sensitive habitats/open space creates an abrupt transition between two different land uses. Encroachment onto sensitive habitats/open space could affect environmental and biological conditions and increase the magnitude of edge effects on biological resources (see Comment #6). CDFW recommends the EIR provide alternatives to the Project that would not result in conversion of sensitive habitats/open space into developed areas. CDFW also recommends the EIR provide alternatives that would not encroach onto sensitive habitats/open space, particularly conservation easements. Pursuant to CEQA Guidelines section 15126.6, an EIR "shall describe a range of reasonable alternatives to the project, or to the location of the project, which would feasible attain most of the basic objectives of the project but would avoid or substantially lessen any of the significant effects of the project, even if these alternatives would impede to some degree the attainment of the project objectives." Furthermore, an EIR "shall include sufficient information about alternatives to allow meaningful evaluation, analysis, and comparison with the proposed project" (CEQA Guidelines, § 15126.6) (see General Comment #6).
 - c) If avoidance is not feasible, CDFW recommends the EIR provide measures to mitigate for impacts to sensitive habitats/open space. There should be no net loss of sensitive habitats/open space. CDFW recommends the EIR provide measures where any future development facilitated by the Project mitigates (avoids first if feasible) for project-level impacts on sensitive habitats/open space not previously identified in the EIR. CDFW recommends the EIR provide a measure where any future development facilitated by the Project establishes unobstructed vegetated buffers and setbacks. The EIR should provide standards for an effective buffer and setback; however, the buffer and setback distance should be increased at a project-level as needed. The EIR should provide justifications for the effectiveness of all proposed mitigation measures. The EIR should provide sufficient information and disclosure to facilitate meaningful public review, analysis, and comment on the adequacy of proposed mitigation measures to offset Project-related impacts on sensitive habitats/open space.
- 2) Fire. The Project proposes to increase development in a 'Very High' Fire Severity Zone (County of Los Angeles 2021). Development in the wildland urban interface could increase fire frequency and intensity, thus impacting biological resources. Moreover, fuel modification would need to occur within the footprint of the development site. Fuel modification would increase habitat loss. CDFW recommends the EIR provide a discussion as to how the Project may impact sensitive habitats/open space with respect to potentially intensifying land use in and/or around areas that are highly susceptible to fire.
 - 3) Development and Conservation. To accommodate increased housing needs, the City is expected to build more units in the coming years. CDFW recommends the City maximize development where it already exists in order to protect natural lands from development and habitat loss. CDFW recommends the City consider regional and State-wide natural resource conservation strategies outlined in the following reports: [Safeguarding California Plan: 2018](#)

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[Update](#) (CNRA 2018); [California State Wildlife Action Plan: A Conservation Legacy for Californians](#) (CDFW 2015); and, [California 2030 Natural and Working Lands Climate Change Implementation Plan: January 2019 Draft](#) (CalEPA et al. 2019).

- 4) Impacts on Wildlife Corridors and Habitat Connectivity. According to the *Natural Areas Small-California Essential Habitat Connectivity* dataset available in BIOS, the Project area supports large, relatively natural habitat blocks that support native biodiversity and areas essential for ecological connectivity between them (CDFW 2021b). The Project could impact the ecological integrity and function of wildlife corridors and steppingstones supporting resident and transient wildlife movement. Habitat fragmentation could threaten the viability of remaining natural resources. Maintaining wildlife corridors and habitat connectivity is essential for wildlife survival and is increasingly important considering habitat loss and climate change.
- a) CDFW recommends the City analyze whether the Project would impact wildlife corridors (see General Comment #5e). Impacts include (but are not limited to) habitat loss and fragmentation, narrowing of a wildlife corridor, and introduction of barriers to wildlife movement. CDFW recommends such an analysis be supported by studies to document wildlife activity and movement through Project area where development is proposed. Technical detail such as data, maps, diagrams, and similar relevant information should be provided to permit full assessment of significant environmental impacts by reviewing agencies and members of the public (CEQA Guidelines, §15147).
- b) CDFW recommends the Project avoid developing and encroaching onto wildlife corridors. If avoidance is not feasible, CDFW recommends the EIR provide measures to mitigate for the Project's significant impacts on wildlife corridors (see General Comments #9 and #10). CDFW also recommends the EIR provide measures where any future development facilitated by the Project mitigates (avoids first if feasible) for project-level impacts on wildlife corridors not previously identified in the EIR.
- 5) Impacts on Wildlife. The Project's potential to increase development in the wildland urban interface could impact wildlife. Impacts could result from increased human presence, traffic, noise, and artificial lighting. Increased human-wildlife interactions could lead to wildlife injury or mortality. For example, as human population and communities expand into wildland areas, there has been a commensurate increase in direct and indirect interaction between mountain lions and people (CDFW 2013). As a result, the need to relocate or humanely euthanize mountain lions (depredation kills) may increase for public safety.

CDFW recommends City analyze whether the Project may have direct and indirect impacts on wildlife resulting from increased human presence, traffic, noise, and artificial lighting (also see General Comment #5e). An assessment of impacts on wildlife should also provide a discussion of edge effects, including (but not limited to) introduction and invasion of non-native plant species into natural areas; attraction for wildlife with food or backyard conditions; predation and disease by domestic animals; and habitat fragmentation caused by volunteer trails.

- 6) Coastal California Gnatcatcher. The Project area contains critical habitat for the coastal California gnatcatcher (*Polioptila californica californica*), a California Species of Special

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Concern (SSC) and a species listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) (USFWS 2021a). CDFW recommends the EIR discuss the Project's potential impacts on coastal California gnatcatcher and habitat. The EIR should provide measures to avoid those impacts or measures to mitigate for impacts if avoidance is not feasible.

- 7) Additional Sensitive and Special Status Species. The Palos Verdes Peninsula supports additional sensitive and special status species. CDFW recommends the EIR discuss the Project's potential impacts on the following species and habitat: cactus wren (*Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus*); El Segundo blue butterfly (*Euphilotes battoides allyni*) listed as endangered under ESA; and Palos Verdes blue butterfly (*Glaucopsyche lygdamus palosverdesensis*) also listed as endangered under ESA; and the Monarch butterfly-California overwintering population (*Danaus plexippus*). In California, monarchs are included on the CDFW's [Terrestrial and Vernal Pool Invertebrates of Conservation Priority](#) list and identified as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the [State Wildlife Action Plan](#) (CDFW 2017, CDFW 2015).
- 8) Jurisdictional Waters. According to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) [National Wetland Inventory](#), there are multiple segments of streams running through the Project area (USFWS 2021b).
 - a) CDFW recommends the City identify and delineate all streams within the Project area and provide a discussion of the Project's potential impacts on streams. Modifications to a river, creek, or stream in one area may result in bank erosion, channel incision, or drop in water level along that stream outside of the immediate impact area. Therefore, CDFW recommends the EIR discuss whether impacts on streams within the Project area would impact those streams immediately outside of the Project area where there is hydrologic connectivity. Potential impacts such as changes to drainage pattern, runoff, and sedimentation should be discussed.
 - b) CDFW recommends the Project avoid impacting streams and associated vegetation. Herbaceous vegetation, woody vegetation, and woodlands adjacent to streams serve to protect the integrity of these resources and help maintain natural sedimentation processes. Where development may occur near a stream but may avoid impacts, the EIR should provide a justification as to why the chosen setback distance of the proposed development(s) would be effective to avoid impacts on streams and associated vegetation. Furthermore, CDFW recommends the EIR provide minimum standards for effective unobstructed vegetated buffers and setbacks adjoining streams and associated vegetation for all development facilitated by the Project. The buffer and setback distance should be increased at a project-level as needed. The EIR should provide justification for the effectiveness of chosen buffer and setback distances.
 - c) If avoidance is not feasible, the EIR should include measures where future housing development facilitated by the Project provides the following:
 - A stream delineation and analysis of impacts. The delineation should be conducted pursuant to the to the USFWS wetland definition adopted by CDFW (Cowardin et al. 1979). Be advised that some wetland and riparian habitats subject to CDFW's authority may extend beyond the jurisdictional limits of the

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U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Section 404 permit and Regional Water Quality Control Board Section 401 Certification;

- A Lake and Streambed Alteration (LSA) Notification to CDFW pursuant to Fish and Game Code Section 1600 *et seq.* if applicable. As a Responsible Agency under CEQA, CDFW has authority over activities in streams and/or lakes that will divert or obstruct the natural flow, or change the bed, channel, or bank (including vegetation associated with the stream or lake) of a river or stream or use material from a streambed. For any such activities, the project applicant (or "entity") must notify CDFW. CDFW's issuance of a LSA Agreement for a project that is subject to CEQA will require CEQA compliance actions by CDFW as a Responsible Agency. As a Responsible Agency, CDFW may consider the environmental document of the local jurisdiction (Lead Agency) for the Project. To minimize additional requirements by CDFW pursuant to section 1600 *et seq.* and/or under CEQA, the environmental document should fully identify the potential impacts to the stream or riparian resources and provide adequate avoidance, mitigation, monitoring, and reporting commitments for issuance of the LSA Agreement. Please visit CDFW's [Lake and Streambed Alteration Program](#) webpage for more information (CDFW 2021c).
 - As part of the LSA Notification process, CDFW requests a hydrological evaluation of the 100-year storm event to provide information on how water and sediment is conveyed through the Project area. Additionally, the hydrological evaluation should assess the 100, 50, 25, 10, 5, and 2-year frequency flood events to evaluate existing and proposed conditions and erosion/scour potential. CDFW recommends the project-level CEQA document discuss the results and address avoidance, minimization, and/or mitigation measures that may be necessary to reduce potential significant impacts.
- 9) Los Angeles County Significant Ecological Areas (SEAs). The Project area contains or is adjacent to lands that are a part of the Palos Verdes Peninsula and Coastline SEA. [Los Angeles County Significant Ecological Areas](#) are officially designated areas within Los Angeles County identified as having irreplaceable biological resources (LACDRP 2019). These areas represent the wide-ranging biodiversity of Los Angeles County and contain some of Los Angeles County's most important biological resources. Therefore, CDFW recommends the EIR provide a discussion of Project impacts on the Palos Verdes Peninsula and Coastline SEA.
- 10) Nesting Birds. The Project may impact nesting birds and raptors as a result of development facilitated by the Project. Project activities occurring during the bird and raptor breeding and nesting season could result in the incidental loss of fertile eggs or nestlings, or otherwise lead to nest abandonment.
- a) Migratory nongame native bird species are protected by international treaty under the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) of 1918 (Code of Federal Regulations, Title 50, § 10.13). Sections 3503, 3503.5, and 3513 of the California Fish and Game Code prohibit take of all birds and their active nests including raptors and other migratory nongame birds (as listed under the Federal MBTA). It is unlawful to take, possess, or

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needlessly destroy the nest or eggs of any raptor.

- b) CDFW recommends that measures be taken to fully avoid impacts to nesting birds and raptors. CDFW recommends the EIR include a measure where future development facilitated by the Project avoids ground-disturbing activities (e.g., mobilizing, staging, drilling, and excavating) and vegetation removal during the avian breeding season which generally runs from February 15 through September 15 (as early as January 1 for some raptors) to avoid take of birds, raptors, or their eggs.
 - c) If impacts to nesting birds and raptors cannot be avoided, CDFW recommends the EIR include measures where future development facilitated by the Project mitigates for impacts. CDFW recommends surveys by a qualified biologist with experience conducting breeding bird and raptor surveys. Surveys are needed to detect protected native birds and raptors occurring in suitable nesting habitat that may be disturbed and any other such habitat within 300 feet of the Project disturbance area, to the extent allowable and accessible. For raptors, this radius should be expanded to 500 feet and 0.5 mile for special status species, if feasible. Project personnel, including all contractors working on site, should be instructed on the sensitivity of the area. Reductions in the nest buffer distance may be appropriate depending on the avian species involved, ambient levels of human activity, screening vegetation, or possibly other factors.
- 11) Loss of Bird and Raptor Nesting and Breeding Habitat. Coastal sage scrub habitat in the Palos Verdes Peninsula supports nesting birds, including sensitive and special status species. Development occurring adjacent to the wildlife urban interface and habitats such as coastal sage scrub could impact nesting and breeding habitat for birds and raptors. Direct impacts such as habitat loss and indirect impacts such as increased edge effects could eliminate habitat or reduce habitat quality.
- a) CDFW recommends the EIR analyze and discuss the Project's impacts on bird and raptor nesting and breeding habitat. Edge effects should also be analyzed and discussed (see Comment #6). CDFW recommends the EIR disclose the amount of bird and raptor nesting and breeding habitat that would be impacted and lost as a result of the proposed Project.
 - b) CDFW recommends the Project avoid developing and encroaching onto nesting and breeding habitat for birds and raptors. If avoidance is not feasible, CDFW recommends the EIR provide measures to mitigate for impacts on bird and raptor nesting and breeding habitat. Depending on the status of the bird or raptor species impacted, replacement habitat acres should increase with the occurrence of a Species of Special Concern. Replacement habitat acres should further increase with the occurrence of a CESA-listed threatened or endangered species.
 - c) CDFW recommends the EIR provide measures where future development facilitated by the Project avoids removal of any native trees, large and dense-canopied native and non-native trees, and trees occurring in high density. CDFW also recommends avoiding impacts to understory vegetation (e.g., ground cover, subshrubs, and shrubs). If trees are removed, CDFW recommends future development facilitated by the Project provides replacement to compensate for temporal or permanent loss habitat within a project site. CDFW recommends planting native tree and shrub species preferred by birds and are

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native to the area.

- 12) Bats. Canyons, abandoned structures, and areas where there are large, dense canopied trees in the Project area could provide roosting and foraging habitat for bats.
- a) Bats are considered non-game mammals and are afforded protection by State law from take and/or harassment (Fish & G. Code, § 4150; Cal. Code of Regs., § 251.1). Additionally, some bats are SSC. CEQA provides protection not only for CESA-listed species, but for any species including but not limited to SSC which can be shown to meet the criteria for State listing. These SSC meet the CEQA definition of endangered, rare, or threatened species (CEQA Guidelines, § 15380). Take of SSC could require a mandatory finding of significance (CEQA Guidelines, § 15065).
 - b) CDFW recommends the EIR discuss whether the Project could impact bats. Project construction and activities, including (but not limited to) ground disturbance, vegetation removal, and any activities leading to increased noise levels may have direct and/or indirect impacts on bats and roosts. Accordingly, CDFW recommends the EIR provide measures where future development facilitated by the Project avoids potential impacts on bats. CDFW recommends the EIR provide measures where future development facilitated by the Project provides surveys for bats and roosts. The project-level environmental document should disclose and discuss potential impacts on bats/roosts. If necessary, to reduce impacts to less than significant, the project-level environmental document should provide bat-specific avoidance and/or mitigation measures [CEQA Guidelines, § 15126.4(a)(1)].

General Comments

- 1) Disclosure. An environmental document should provide an adequate, complete, and detailed disclosure about the effect which a proposed project is likely to have on the environment (Pub. Resources Code, § 20161; CEQA Guidelines, §15151). Adequate disclosure is necessary so CDFW may provide comments on the adequacy of proposed avoidance, minimization, or mitigation measures, as well as to assess the significance of the specific impact relative to plant and wildlife species impacted (e.g., current range, distribution, population trends, and connectivity).
- 2) Mitigation Measures. Public agencies have a duty under CEQA to prevent significant, avoidable damage to the environment by requiring changes in projects through the use of feasible alternatives or mitigation measures [CEQA Guidelines, §§ 15002(a)(3), 15021]. Pursuant to CEQA Guidelines section 15126.4, an environmental document “shall describe feasible measures which could mitigate for impacts below a significant level under CEQA.”
 - a) Level of Detail. Mitigation measures must be feasible, effective, implemented, and fully enforceable/imposed by the lead agency through permit conditions, agreements, or other legally binding instruments (Pub. Resources Code, § 21081.6(b); CEQA Guidelines, § 15126.4). A public agency “shall provide the measures that are fully enforceable through permit conditions, agreements, or other measures” (Pub. Resources Code, § 21081.6). CDFW recommends that the City provide mitigation measures that are specific, detailed (i.e., responsible party, timing, specific actions, location), and clear in order for a measure to be fully enforceable and implemented

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successfully via a mitigation monitoring and/or reporting program (Pub. Resources Code, § 21081.6; CEQA Guidelines, § 15097). Adequate disclosure is necessary so CDFW may provide comments on the adequacy and feasibility of proposed mitigation measures.

- b) Disclosure of Impacts. If a proposed mitigation measure would cause one or more significant effects, in addition to impacts caused by the Project as proposed, the environmental document should include a discussion of the effects of proposed mitigation measures [CEQA Guidelines, § 15126.4(a)(1)]. In that regard, the environmental document should provide an adequate, complete, and detailed disclosure about a project's proposed mitigation measure(s). Adequate disclosure is necessary so CDFW may assess the potential impacts of proposed mitigation measures.
- 3) Biological Baseline Assessment. An adequate biological resources assessment should provide a complete assessment and impact analysis of the flora and fauna within and adjacent to a project site and where a project may result in ground disturbance. The assessment and analysis should place emphasis upon identifying endangered, threatened, sensitive, regionally, and locally unique species, and sensitive habitats. Impact analysis will aid in determining any direct, indirect, and cumulative biological impacts, as well as specific mitigation or avoidance measures necessary to offset those impacts. CDFW recommends avoiding any sensitive natural communities found on or adjacent to a project. CDFW also considers impacts to California Species of Special Concern a significant direct and cumulative adverse effect without implementing appropriate avoidance and/or mitigation measures. An environmental document should include the following information:
 - a) Information on the regional setting that is critical to an assessment of environmental impacts, with special emphasis on resources that are rare or unique to the region [CEQA Guidelines, § 15125(c)]. An environmental document should include measures to fully avoid and otherwise protect Sensitive Natural Communities from project-related impacts. CDFW considers these communities as threatened habitats having both regional and local significance. Plant communities, alliances, and associations with a state-wide ranking of S1, S2, and S3 should be considered sensitive and declining at the local and regional level. These ranks can be obtained by visiting the [Vegetation Classification and Mapping Program - Natural Communities](#) webpage (CDFW 2021d);
 - b) A thorough, recent, floristic-based assessment of special status plants and natural communities following CDFW's [Protocols for Surveying and Evaluating Impacts to Special Status Native Plant Populations and Sensitive Natural Communities](#) (CDFW 2018). Adjoining habitat areas should be included where project construction and activities could lead to direct or indirect impacts off site;
 - c) Floristic, alliance- and/or association-based mapping and vegetation impact assessments conducted at a project site and within the neighboring vicinity. The [Manual of California Vegetation](#) (MCV), second edition, should also be used to inform this mapping and assessment (Sawyer et al. 2009). Adjoining habitat areas should be included in this assessment where project activities could lead to direct or indirect impacts off site. Habitat mapping at the alliance level will help establish baseline vegetation conditions;

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- d) A complete, recent, assessment of the biological resources associated with each habitat type on site and within adjacent areas that could also be affected by a project. CDFW's [California Natural Diversity Database](#) (CNDDDB) in Sacramento should be contacted to obtain current information on any previously reported sensitive species and habitat (CDFW 2021e). An assessment should include a nine-quadrangle search of the CNDDDB to determine a list of species potentially present at a project site. A lack of records in the CNDDDB does not mean that rare, threatened, or endangered plants and wildlife do not occur in the project site. Field verification for the presence or absence of sensitive species is necessary to provide a complete biological assessment for adequate CEQA review [CEQA Guidelines, § 15003(i)];
 - e) A complete, recent, assessment of rare, threatened, and endangered, and other sensitive species on site and within the area of potential effect, including California Species of Special Concern and California Fully Protected Species (Fish & G. Code, §§ 3511, 4700, 5050, and 5515). Species to be addressed should include all those which meet the CEQA definition of endangered, rare, or threatened species (CEQA Guidelines, § 15380). Seasonal variations in use of a project site should also be addressed such as wintering, roosting, nesting, and foraging habitat. Focused species-specific surveys, conducted at the appropriate time of year and time of day when the sensitive species are active or otherwise identifiable, may be required if suitable habitat is present. See CDFW's [Survey and Monitoring Protocols and Guidelines](#) for established survey protocol for select species (CDFW 2021f). Acceptable species-specific survey procedures may be developed in consultation with CDFW and the USFWS; and,
 - f) A recent wildlife and rare plant survey. CDFW generally considers biological field assessments for wildlife to be valid for a one-year period, and assessments for rare plants may be considered valid for a period of up to three years. Some aspects of a proposed project may warrant periodic updated surveys for certain sensitive taxa, particularly if build out could occur over a protracted time frame or in phases.
- 4) Data. CEQA requires that information developed in environmental impact reports be incorporated into a database which may be used to make subsequent or supplemental environmental determinations [Pub. Resources Code, § 21003, subd. (e)]. Accordingly, please report any special status species and natural communities detected by completing and submitting [CNDDDB Field Survey Forms](#) (CDFW 2021g). The City should ensure data collected for the preparation of any Project-related environmental document be properly submitted, with all data fields applicable filled out. The data entry should also list pending development as a threat and then update this occurrence after impacts have occurred.
- 5) Biological Direct, Indirect, and Cumulative Impacts. CDFW recommends providing a thorough discussion of direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts expected to adversely affect biological resources, with specific measures to offset such impacts. The EIR should address the following:
- a) A discussion regarding Project-related indirect impacts on biological resources, including resources in nearby public lands, open space, adjacent natural habitats, riparian ecosystems, and any designated and/or proposed or existing reserve lands [e.g., preserve lands associated with a Natural Community Conservation Plan (Fish & G.

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- Code, § 2800 et. seq.]). Impacts on, and maintenance of, wildlife corridor/movement areas, including access to undisturbed habitats in adjacent areas, should be fully evaluated in the EIR;
- b) A discussion of both the short-term and long-term effects to species population distribution and concentration and alterations of the ecosystem supporting the species impacted [CEQA Guidelines, § 15126.2(a)];
 - c) A discussion of potential adverse impacts from lighting, noise, temporary and permanent human activity, and exotic species, and identification of any mitigation measures;
 - d) A discussion of Project-related changes on drainage patterns; the volume, velocity, and frequency of existing and post-Project surface flows; polluted runoff; soil erosion and/or sedimentation in streams and water bodies; and, post-Project fate of runoff from the Project sites. The discussion should also address the potential water extraction activities and the potential resulting impacts on the habitat (if any) supported by the groundwater. Mitigation measures proposed to alleviate such Project impacts should be included;
 - e) An analysis of impacts from proposed changes to land use designations and zoning, and existing land use designation and zoning located nearby or adjacent to natural areas that may inadvertently contribute to wildlife-human interactions. A discussion of possible conflicts and mitigation measures to reduce these conflicts should be included in the EIR; and,
 - f) A cumulative effects analysis, as described under CEQA Guidelines section 15130. General and specific plans, as well as past, present, and anticipated future projects, should be analyzed relative to their impacts on similar plant and wildlife species, habitat, and vegetation communities. If the City determines that the Project would not have a cumulative impact, the environmental document should indicate why the cumulative impact is not significant. The City's conclusion should be supported by facts and analyses [CEQA Guidelines, § 15130(a)(2)].
- 6) Project Description and Alternatives. To enable CDFW to adequately review and comment on the proposed Project from the standpoint of the protection of plants, fish, and wildlife, we recommend the following information be included in the EIR:
- a) A complete discussion of the purpose and need for, and description of, the proposed Project, including all staging areas; access routes to the construction and staging areas; fuel modification footprint; and grading footprint;
 - b) Pursuant to CEQA Guidelines section 15126.6(a), an environmental document “shall describe a reasonable range of potentially feasible alternatives to the Project, or to the location of the Project, which would feasibly attain most of the basic objectives of the Project but would avoid or substantially lessen any of the significant effects of the Project.” CEQA Guidelines section 15126.6(f)(2) states if the Lead Agency concludes that no feasible alternative locations exist, it must disclose the reasons for this conclusion and should include reasons in the environmental document; and,

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- c) A range of feasible alternatives to the Project location and design features to avoid or otherwise minimize direct and indirect impacts to sensitive biological resources and wildlife movement areas. CDFW recommends the City consider configuring Project construction and activities, as well as the development footprint, in such a way as to fully avoid impacts to sensitive and special status plants and wildlife species, habitat, and sensitive vegetation communities. CDFW also recommends the City consider establishing appropriate setbacks from sensitive and special status biological resources. Setbacks should not be impacted by ground disturbance or hydrological changes for the duration of the Project and from any future development. As a general rule, CDFW recommends reducing or clustering the development footprint to retain unobstructed spaces for vegetation and wildlife and provide connections for wildlife between properties and minimize obstacles to open space.

Project alternatives should be thoroughly evaluated, even if an alternative would impede, to some degree, the attainment of the Project objectives or would be more costly (CEQA Guidelines, § 15126.6).

- d) Where the Project may impact aquatic and riparian resources, CDFW recommends the City consider alternatives that would fully avoid impacts to such resources. CDFW also recommends alternatives that would allow not impede, alter, or otherwise modify existing surface flow; watercourse and meander; and water-dependent ecosystems and vegetation communities. Project-related designs should consider elevated crossings to avoid channelizing or narrowing of streams. Any modifications to a river, creek, or stream may cause or magnify upstream bank erosion, channel incision, and drop in water level and cause the stream to alter its course of flow.
- 7) CESA. CDFW considers adverse impacts to a species protected by CESA to be significant without mitigation under CEQA. As to CESA, take of any endangered, threatened, candidate species, or CESA-listed plant species that results from the Project is prohibited, except as authorized by state law (Fish & G. Code §§ 2080, 2085; Cal. Code Regs., tit. 14, §786.9). Consequently, if the Project or any Project-related activity will result in take of a species designated as endangered or threatened, or a candidate for listing under CESA, CDFW recommends that the project proponent seek appropriate take authorization under CESA prior to implementing the project. Appropriate authorization from CDFW may include an Incidental Take Permit (ITP) or a consistency determination in certain circumstances, among other options [Fish & G. Code, §§ 2080.1, 2081, subds. (b) and (c)]. Early consultation is encouraged, as significant modification to a project and mitigation measures may be required in order to obtain a CESA Permit. Revisions to the Fish and Game Code, effective January 1998, may require that CDFW issue a separate CEQA document for the issuance of an ITP unless the project CEQA document addresses all project impacts to CESA-listed species and specifies a mitigation monitoring and reporting program that will meet the requirements of an ITP. For these reasons, biological mitigation monitoring and reporting proposals should be of sufficient detail and resolution to satisfy the requirements for a CESA ITP.
- 8) Translocation/Salvage of Plants and Animal Species. Translocation and transplantation is the process of moving an individual from a project site and permanently moving it to a new location. CDFW generally does not support the use of translocation or transplantation as the primary mitigation strategy for unavoidable impacts to rare, threatened, or endangered plant

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or animal species. Studies have shown that these efforts are experimental and the outcome unreliable. CDFW has found that permanent preservation and management of habitat capable of supporting these species is often a more effective long-term strategy for conserving sensitive plants and animals and their habitats.

- 9) Compensatory Mitigation. An environmental document should include mitigation measures for adverse project-related direct or indirect impacts to sensitive plants, animals, and habitats. Mitigation measures should emphasize avoidance and reduction of project-related impacts. For unavoidable impacts, on-site habitat restoration or enhancement should be discussed in detail. If on-site mitigation is not feasible or would not be biologically viable and therefore not adequately mitigate the loss of biological functions and values, off-site mitigation through habitat creation and/or acquisition and preservation in perpetuity should be addressed. Areas proposed as mitigation lands should be protected in perpetuity with a conservation easement, financial assurance and dedicated to a qualified entity for long-term management and monitoring. Under Government Code, section 65967, the Lead Agency must exercise due diligence in reviewing the qualifications of a governmental entity, special district, or nonprofit organization to effectively manage and steward land, water, or natural resources on mitigation lands it approves.
- 10) Long-term Management of Mitigation Lands. For proposed preservation and/or restoration, an environmental document should include measures to protect the targeted habitat values from direct and indirect negative impacts in perpetuity. The objective should be to offset the project-induced qualitative and quantitative losses of wildlife habitat values. Issues that should be addressed include (but are not limited to) restrictions on access, proposed land dedications, monitoring and management programs, control of illegal dumping, water pollution, and increased human intrusion. An appropriate non-wasting endowment should be set aside to provide for long-term management of mitigation lands.

Conclusion

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the NOP for the Rolling Hills Estates General Plan Update to assist the City of Rolling Hills Estates in identifying and mitigating Project impacts on biological resources. If you have any questions or comments regarding this letter, please contact Ruby Kwan-Davis, Senior Environmental Scientist (Specialist), at Ruby.Kwan-Davis@wildlife.ca.gov or (562)-619-2230.

Sincerely,

DocuSigned by:

Erinn Wilson-Olgin

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